

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: ANA SUAREZ [PUERTO RICO]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL, CRAIG THOMAS, YINGCHAN ZHANG

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C = CHRISTOPH

A = ANA

T = THOMAS

Z = ZHANG

S = ??

Tape 08.38

C: If you could just say your name and

A: My name is Ana Suarez. I moved from Puerto Rico when I was about nine years old. I remember the day. It was May 27, 1955. I came directly to Maine.... The reason why we were there was that my step-father worked for a farm, and the company that he was working with, they decided they wanted him full-time, not just in the summer time, but also in the winter... to grow seeds and things like that. That's why they kept him. He was sort of like a supervisor. When the workers came in the spring, he had everything ready for them.... That's how we moved to Maine. We stayed there probably until I was sixteen? We went to school there, and then.... What happened was that the farmer who owned the place he passed away. His children all went to college, and they didn't want to do the same thing. We stayed there for a year because then we owned our own house. Then we had a fire! We lost the house! That happened on January 6 – Three Kings Day – which is Christmas for us. I'll never forget that either. That's how we ended up in Lowell because we lost everything. (C: My god!) We had family here in Lowell. That was in 1962. I don't remember the month, but it was in 1962.

C: Do you know where you moved to in Lowell exactly?

A: Chelmsford Street.

C: Chelmsford Street...That was at the time when they built the Connector, right?

A: Yes.

C: Ok.

A: So that's where we used to live.

S: Were you still living there when the Connector was being built?

A: No. We had moved to Hill Street.

T: I don't know if you remember, but when they built the Connector, did they have any neighborhood meetings?

A: I don't remember ever going to meetings, or anybody in the neighborhood ever going. I don't remember any one talking about any meetings.

C: You work for One Lowell right?

A: One Lowell, yes.

C: And your parent liaison?

A: Yes. I work with students who are having a very difficult time from grade six up to high school. We get referrals from the school department if a student is missing days, is having a difficult time, lonely, disability, things like that. We educate the parents on how to find services for the students.

C: Let's talk a little bit more about your life in Lowell. I heard that in the 1970s, there was a fairly sizable Puerto Rican community in Lowell?

A: When I came to Lowell, there were probably no more than ten families here.

C: Oh wow. Did that increase then?

A: Little by little. That's when I started working for the community, interpreting, getting people to doctor's appointments, doing education programs, legal services, everything.

C: Do you still cook Puerto Rican dishes?

A: Oh yes. Always.

C: Where do you shop for food? Do you go to a special Hispanic store?

A: We pretty much we have everything in the supermarkets. When we need something special then we go to Boston.

C: Is there, is there a specific area in Boston that you go to?

A: We used to go around Fenway. They had a store there. And the fish market, it used to be around that area also.

C: Where do you live now and do you feel like you are part of a Puerto Rican neighborhood or just a neighborhood in general?

A: I already told you that was living on Chelmsford Street, and then on Hill Street. I also used to own my own home, close to Saint Memorial Hospital. Then a couple of years ago I went back to Puerto Rico. I was there for ten years and then came back. I missed Lowell. I really did. I missed Lowell even though I was in my own culture. I found it very difficult and different. Finally I decided I can't take it any longer. I am going back. So then, I was living in Belvidere. My daughter owns a house there so I was living there. And then I house-sited, right now that's what I'm doing for a friend of mine who went back to Panama. So right now I'm living on Chestnut Street, which is close to where I used to have my own house.

C: Did you and your family when you came here predominantly speak Spanish?

A: Yes, yes.

C: How about with your daughter, when you raised your daughter? Were you speaking with her in Spanish too?

A: My husband and I had a difficult time with that because he wanted them to speak Spanish all the time when they were home. But because of the difficult time I had when I was a child, as a student, I didn't want them to go through that.... I have four children... and I was always speaking English. My two youngest ones they could speak and read Spanish. My two older ones, forget it! They could understand it, you know if you talk to them, but they cannot read it, and they can't talk back to you.

C: In school, did you feel that you were discriminated against because you were a Spanish-speaker? Can you talk about some of the things that happened to you?

A: Discrimination has always been here. I think it's always going to be here. When I moved to Lowell, it was hard finding an apartment. I remember getting an apartment through this real estate person. . .but the landlord found out that I was Puerto Rican. He went back to the realtor and told him: "I don't want them in there." You just keep going just don't give up. And to this day. . .to be honest with you it is worse.

C: Can you talk a little bit about that, and only if you are comfortable? We are trying to learn about the challenges and tensions that immigrants face in their dealings with mainstream society. This city likes to portray itself as a multi-cultural and very open city. Is that your experience too?

A: I think it depends.... In terms of politics... we are talking about politicians who have been there for many years and they don't want to change. So you find that door locked...there is a lot of discrimination.... But it's not everybody. There are a lot of nice people out there. But there are some who discriminate.

C: What kind of challenges do Hispanic kids or other immigrant kids face in your experience?

A: They feel so much discrimination... and they have a hard time tolerating it.... There is just a lot of it everywhere.... My daughter... right now she's going through discrimination. She's a very smart person. She works for an insurance company. She has found that even at work... they made so many comments about Hispanics or black people.... She was going through that and finally she got to the point that she got so frustrated that she wanted to quit. And I said "don't do that... You have to go through. You know, if you show that you can deal with it, that you are not the type of person who they think you are, then they are going to change... you have to teach them, because they are not educated." That's one of the problems, people are not educated. Like right now, I came from a meeting, talking about these kinds of issues. And you know what's going on with immigration. . Even myself, I've been asked to show my license to prove that I'm a Puerto Rican, not a Dominican. So you know that is happening right now. But you have to learn how to deal with it.

C: Do you feel that this has increased with the current political debate, has it got worse in the last couple of years?

A: Yes. It is bad, really bad. I mean, my son who is in college, he went to open a savings account. He wasn't able to that because they wanted his green card.

C: Puerto Rican needing a green card?

A: Exactly

Z: What did he do?

A: He called me. He says 'Why I can't open an account? I have my ID, I have my birth certificate, and my social security card. But they will not allow me to open a saving account.' I say 'why?' He says 'because I don't have my green card.' 'Give me the name of the person who asked that question and give me the telephone number of the bank.' So I called and talked for the supervisor.

C: Whenever you think you have heard it all....

A: No. Unfortunately there is a lot of that stuff

C: I want to go back a little, back to school children. There's a fair amount of new literature that has come out by researches, about the challenges that kids face.... But beyond sort of that academic work, I wanna hear you as a practitioner. Some of the very specific challenges and issues that you see in terms of language, in terms of just, that, that everyone thinks that kids need

to assimilate to a certain idea or perception of what mainstream America has to be about? What it means to be an immigrant?

A: What I have seen... the issue... is you being labeled. A lot of kids now, I don't know if you know about this, but the issue of wearing color that's an issue in the school.

C: And that's related back to gangs, right?

A: Yes gangs. Some kids are very confused.... Some kids are not gang members but for instance, you are wearing black, so you are gang member. It is confusing for parents.... How can they to make sure that the child is not wearing that color to school. The issue is back again. I said yesterday in a meeting: "Why don't we go back to uniforms? Since you are making it so difficult, let's go back to uniforms... and then there shouldn't be any problems any more." Some students are gang members and it makes it hard for parents to know.... Since 9/11 I think there has been a lot of change and there has been more discrimination....

C: Can we maybe talk a little bit about religion? Do you go to church?

A: Yes, I do.

C: And what denomination?

A: Catholic.

C: What role does religion play in your life? Is it social, spiritual, a little bit of everything?

A: Everything. I believe in my religion. I believe in God. I don't believe everything it says in the Bible. I consider myself Catholic, but things change and I understand that. I don't have to do everything it says in the Bible.... My religion is my heart and nobody is going to tell me what to do.

C: Does it also become a place for you to socially network? Hang out with friends and family?

A: Yes with family, friends, neighbors. After Mass, I don't do it every Sunday... but we go down to the basement and we talk about, what's going on, things like that. We'll have a little coffee. And then in the summer time, we have a lot of things going on. We participate in the Folk Festival, we have the Hispanic Day, things like that, we cook; we do a lot of things. So yes, I'm very sociable at the church.

C: Do you, besides your work and church, are you a member of other social clubs?

A: I used to, but not any more.... I'm getting too old.

C: What club or clubs did you belong to?

A: Well, they used to have the Puerto Rican Festival Club. I used to be a member... and also many years ago, there used to be this agency called UNIDAS. I used to be the vice president.

C: Did you just not have any time any more for the Puerto Rican Festival Club? Or did it fall apart?

A: Everybody kind of left. They have new members now. I guess they are trying to bring it back again. But I don't have the time.

C: No I understand. Did some of the old members just move to the suburbs or did they go back to Puerto Rico?

A: Yeah, that happened. Some went back to Puerto Rico, some moved to Florida, some of the people are still here.

C: Are a lot of the people that are active now more recent arrivals?

A: No. Just the children.

C: Ok. So you find that there's a lot of the families that remained in town? Parents and children, are still around.

A: Yes.

C: So that there's still a family network that basically continues?

A: Yes.

C: Do you have time, the monetary resources to go on vacation at all?

S: Yes. That's where I am going in the next couple of days. I'm getting away from this winter.

C: Do you go Puerto Rico or?

A: Yes, in Florida and Puerto Rico.

C: Do you have much family still in Puerto Rico?

A: I have family there. I have three sisters in Puerto Rico and aunts and uncles on my mother side. But the majority is here. You know my children, my sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I have a lot of cousins.

C: And relatives from the Island, do they sometimes come to visit you and vice versa?

A: Uh huh.

C: How long do folks usually stay when they come here?

A: No more than a month, usually less than that.

C: And when they come to visit you, do you take them to places like Boston or do you show them around the city?

A: I do both.

C: Do you think that in the long run there might be more of a representation of Hispanics, or other more recent immigrants, on the City Council?

A: Maybe in the future, but I don't see it right now. A couple of years back... two people tried to run for City Council, you know, and they were Puerto Rican.... Part of it is also our fault because we have right to vote but a lot of people they just don't. So they don't vote. Just too bad.... I am even having an argument at home with my son who, I got him to register, but now he's giving me a very tough time to vote.

C: Is there a disconnect with politics? Are people checked out because they don't see the necessary change happening, or is it because people are too busy, or is it a little bit of both?

A: It could be both. We don't have a lot of information out there either. We have to do some education. And a lot of people don't know what's happening out there. That's why. And then some people feel that, 'why should I vote? They are not gonna do anything for me.' And that's what I am trying to tell them, 'if you don't vote, they are not gonna do anything for you.'

C: Do you feel like there are sometimes tensions between people of different national origin, between say Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, or Columbians, or, do people generally get along, or is it a little bit of both?

A: I think it's a little bit of both... that's kind of difficult for me to answer....

C: Do your children hold it a little bit against you – about learning the language.

A: To be honest with you, yes. I think I made a big mistake having my kids not speak Spanish. But now my granddaughter is doing it, you know, both girls, they speak both languages. Yes that's why, that's why I recognized that it was a big mistake.... One of my sons works as a correction officer, for a couple of years now. The inmates who don't speak English at all, because his last name is Suarez, they suspect him to know Spanish, and so they are talking to him in Spanish. Now he's getting organized, and because sometimes they are screaming at him, he doesn't know what they are saying. Monday he came home and says 'mom they called me this. What did they say?' I say 'Uh you don't wanna know what they call you.' He has to learn.

Z: Do your children and grandchildren go to the same churches or other social organizations that people of your generation used to go to?

A: That's a good question. No. I guess they are of a different generation. They don't go to church, only my daughter, she is the only one that goes to church with my two grandchildren. But she's not an every-Sunday person -- maybe for Easter, or you know, Christmas, you know things like that. But she's not an every-Sunday person like me and my mom. She considers herself Catholic, but she doesn't believe that you have to be there every Sunday.

C: The Park sponsors the Folk Festival. You and your church are part of that. But did you go to the National Park, some of the museums, at all?

A: The only thing that I remember that I did, when the Park had musicians coming from other areas. They had someone directly from Puerto Rico to sing at the, the Lowell High School. I was there. But it was not announced.

C: Ok, so there's an issue of marketing

A: The only way that I find out was because I checked on the computer. And not everybody has a computer. To be honest with you, at that show, there were more people from Boston than from Lowell....And....not to be stereotypical, they were mostly white and more affluent?

C: If you would conduct this interview, and you would ask us question, hmm Yingchan or me, we are your immigrants that are getting interviewed [All laugh]. Is there a question you would ask us that we didn't ask you?

A: Probably how do you, you know, how would you feel being here?

C: How do you feel about being here? You said earlier when you talked about leaving Puerto Rico that you feel more at home in Lowell.

A: I love Lowell. I really do. And that's one of the reasons why I came back. And I'm not the only one, I mean, I heard from people who retired after being here for so many years. They go back to Puerto Rico and they come back. I just saw a woman about two weeks ago. Her and her husband they retired. Her husband passed away two years ago and she sold her house in Puerto Rico and came back here. Because she had her children, grandchildren here, that's something that calls you back. And that was one of my reason, my children are here. But no matter what, it is a good place to live. There are nice people out there. I know when I was moving into the neighborhood where I live now people were saying 'wow, you don't wanna move there. You know, your car won't be safe, you have to lock your car, you have to lock your pocket book.' I also lived on Chestnut Street which is also a "bad" area. But let me tell you, I have left my pocket book in my car sometimes because I'm... that's the way I am; that's the type of person I am. I left my car open a couple of times when I went to bed and forgot to lock my door. I never had any problem. The neighbors, I have no problems with them, at all. The first day I did, the first day. But after they got to know me, things like that, you know, you make your own place. After that, I had no problems. Right now they go 'Hi, how are you?' And I say 'Hi, how are you?' You know, we say hi to each other. We keep an eye on each other. My house is right on High Street close to the fire station. That's where I went when one of our firemen died. Well, the whole neighborhood did, we got together and we bought flowers and we went to the fire station.

Nobody told us to do it; we did it ourselves. I went to the funeral too, just to be there. So that's the type of neighborhood. Even though people say it's a bad neighborhood. It's not a bad neighborhood. I never had any problems.

C: Ana thank you so much for talking with us. We really appreciate it. And thank you for sharing your interesting story.